

THE MYTHICAL ELEMENT IN CHRISTIANITY.

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THE ancient world was a world of myth and miracle. We have been wont to speak of "hoar antiquity" as if the age of the world, instead of its infancy, were in the distant past and wisdom had been with those of "old time." In the ancient days men thought and imagined, dreamed dreams and saw visions; but they knew little of the universe, and reason had to work with a small store of real fact and actual truth. The infancy of the race was long, its youth of slow growth, its maturity gradual, and only now is it ripening in knowledge and thought, with its old age still in the distant future.

To the ancients at the dawn of history, and for thousands of years, the earth was a flat expanse of unknown bounds, with the universe above and about it. It was believed to be encircled by water, with a dark underworld beneath, but how sustained from unimaginable depths it was beyond the mind of man to conceive, except that some living power, some mighty and tireless deity, or some monster must hold it in place. Above it was spread the arched firmament of stars in which the sun, moon and planets moved in their various courses. Above and beyond that might be realms which the imagination could people with supernal beings and endow with a life free from the vicissitudes of earth.

Of the origin of the world and its inhabitants there was no knowledge and could be no science. Of the powers and operations of nature there was no understanding. The searchings of the imagination were the only resource for the explanation of things, and the appeal to it stimulated its activity. What it had sought out was accepted and believed as truth. That the result was wonderful and marvelous, or in the light of modern knowledge full of childish fancies, did not make it incredible then. From the lips of sages

of the time or mystic dreamers it was taken as divine truth, not to be disputed without sacrilege.

At the beginning of man's "strange eventful history," amid the first gleams of civilization in the valleys of the Nile and the Euphrates, men began to think out the source and origin of what they saw and felt, and to create unseen divinities, sometimes making them visible in dreams or trances or to gifted seers. By these divinities all things could be explained, and their activity need not submit to human limitations or accord with the experiences of men. So a world of myth and miracle was created by the mind of man, to grow and change with the generations, to vary among the nations and become the heritage of the race until science could be born, knowledge should take the place of superstition, and the old order be dispelled.

A great revolution in the thoughts of mankind was wrought by the peculiar genius of the people who gave themselves the name of Israel, and who derived their origin from the land of the Chaldees in the East and found their discipline in servitude in Egypt and in the struggle to possess a land for themselves, in which they triumphed over resistance and fought their way to power in the midst of enemies. They acquired much of the learning of Egypt and of the lore of Babylon, and were far from being isolated from such knowledge of nature and of man as was then extant. Their keen intellect rejected most of the heritage of myth, already two or three thousand years old, but from it they culled material for an advanced mythology of their own. Theirs was simplified, clarified and rationalized in comparison with that of older times and other races. But their explanation of the origin of the earth and the heavens, of man and of the races of men, was as truly mythical as that of the "heathen" whom they scorned, and the deity of their conception was a creature of imagination, which grew and developed with their experience as a struggling congeries of tribes and clans, as a united nation and a divided kingdom, and as victims of ruthless conquest and vassals of an alien power.

There was an intellectual force, an ethical sense and a religious spirit in Israel which raised it high above the nations of the earlier times; but its "Yahveh" was a mythical deity, clothed with the highest attributes of which its wisest men could conceive. They believed in him and in the laws, the threats and promises which their imagination attributed to him, and they deemed all their history to be his work, in spite of its doleful results in a material sense. From Judaism Christianity inherited a strain of myth, but more

from other sources. Judaism itself had been modified by Persian influence. From that source came the idea of a dual power in the universe, a power of good and a power of evil, contending over the destiny of man, whose soul was apart from the physical life and immortal. Thence came the conception of angels dwelling in the heavens and demons peopling the air. Later the Hellenic influence invaded the minds of the heirs of Israel and the people who were mingled with them, and while they rejected the polytheism of Greece, they did not escape some of its implications. They were affected by its philosophy and allured by the airs of Elysium and the gloom of Hades. The life of man was no longer confined to the earth, and final retribution was not of this world.

It was an essential part of the later mythology of Israel that its God was yet to make his people triumph and rule the earth by subjugating to them all other nations, destroying such as would not submit to his will and establishing an everlasting kingdom with a restoration of the revered house of David under the guidance of the almighty ruler of the heavens himself. Much mysticism was mingled with the hope of the coming of this Messiah, or anointed one, and there were those who thought of the destruction of this earth and its inhabitants and the transfer of the sifted and purified remnant of the chosen people to the realm above the starry firmament. Men looked for a sweeping away of all the wicked and a new Jerusalem that should be the center of a glorified kingdom of Zion.

Palestine had fallen under the Roman power and was pervaded with the atmosphere of myth, mingled from various sources, when the spirit of another revolution in men's thoughts was evoked by the humble teacher of Nazareth, to whom the founding of Christianity is commonly ascribed. He founded no institution, prescribed no system of belief, established no form of worship or manner of observance. He taught a simple doctrine of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, a simple ethics of purity and righteousness of conduct, a simple religion of love of God and man and faith in the love of God for man, as the inspiration to right living. He sowed the seed of what he called the rule of God, or the "kingdom of heaven," trusting that it would germinate and grow and spread for the regenerating of humanity; but of the actual course of its development he had no conception. His teaching ran so counter to that of the prevailing religion of his day and of his own people that it excited the wrath, the hatred and the fear of its priests, and they thought to suppress it by compassing his death as a heretic and a dangerous innovator.

That was not exceptional in human history. What was exceptional was the life and character of the man and the vitality of his teaching; but that alone did not account for what followed. Neither was the effect upon men's minds of the cruel and ignominious sacrifice of such a teacher enough to explain it. What led to the long train of consequences was not his life, his teaching or his death, but the belief which almost immediately arose that he did not remain dead, that he came to life, left his sepulcher, appeared to his disciples and departed to a realm of bliss above the sky, whence he would return to save his faithful followers from an impending destruction of the wicked world. Here was where the myth-making spirit naturally and inevitably began its work in founding and developing Christianity as a religious system, and it has never lost its hold.

How the belief in the resurrection, or reanimation, of the body of Jesus first sprang up, the evidence is too confused and conflicting to enable us to know; but it was probably from visions of his appearance to one or another of his disciples, or a company of them in their overwrought state of mind and emotion in the days immediately following his death. Our earliest witness is Paul, who never saw him in his life or in his death, who knew little of his teaching, and was an ardent persecutor of his first followers, seeking to extinguish the rising faith that menaced the established religion. Paul, according to his own testimony, was given to visions and revelations of the spirit, as many with his ardent temperament and morbid nervous system had been before, have been since and still are; and in the excitement of his journey of persecution to Damascus, "breathing threatenings and slaughter," he believed that Jesus appeared to him in a blinding light and spoke to him in a voice of stern rebuke. This was not an experience different in kind from what has many times occurred, however we may interpret it.

We have no first-hand account of this incident from Paul himself. He merely referred, in arguing for belief in the resurrection of the dead in one of his letters, to the appearance of Jesus after his burial to Cephas, to the twelve, to above five hundred brethren at once, to James, to all the apostles, and "last of all as to one born out of due time," to himself. In what form or manner he does not say, and it was many years after his own death that the compiler of material relating to the "acts of the apostles" undertook to describe the incident with miraculous accompaniments. The same writer represents Paul on two different occasions as telling of it

in a slightly different version. Whatever the value of this evidence may be, there is nothing to indicate that the apostle to the Gentiles regarded these appearances as anything but visions. He is made to speak of that to himself as a "heavenly vision." But such visions were to him genuine revelations, like that of the man in a dream calling him to "Come over into Macedonia and help us."

This belief in the resurrection having come to prevail and having been made the basis of Paul's doctrine of salvation from the coming destruction, the gospel writers after his time felt bound to give some account of the way in which it happened. These accounts are so inconsistent with each other, so literal and materialistic in their conception of a dead body restored to life, and so contrary to all reasonable probability, not to say physical possibility, that they are obviously products of the imagination in the effort to explain something devoutly believed as a fact, but unknown in its circumstances.

But the important thing for our purpose is not the accounts of a physical rising of the dead body or the visionary appearance of a departed personality, one of which is incredible and the other a common but subjective phenomenon; but the belief in the resurrection which prevailed when Christian doctrine was forming and when the dogmas of the early church were shaped as the basis of a tenacious system of religious faith. That belief wrought in a soil prolific of myth and in an atmosphere congenial to confidence in the miraculous, and it not only inspired the preaching and sustained the toil and suffering of Paul, but it had a controlling influence upon the writing of the gospels, which came after his time.

So imperfect is the record and so inconsistent are the several accounts that we can have no accurate knowledge of what Jesus did or said; but we get a general impression of his life and character and of the essentials of his teaching that bears the sanction of truth in itself. There is a picture that passes invention and prevails over perversion. It has a distinctness and a light of its own which the cloud of subsequent interpretation and gloss cannot obscure when we fix our vision steadfastly upon the original portraiture. There is no reason to doubt that, as the gentle and inspiring teacher of Nazareth went about in Galilee with his little company of humble disciples, ministering to the sick, comforting the afflicted, appealing to the sinful, preaching love to God and man and proclaiming a coming kingdom when righteousness and purity would reign, wonderful cures and conversions took place, which were multiplied and magnified by the many tongues of rumor and distorted in tradition.

He probably accepted the common belief of the time that maladies affecting the nerves and the mind were due to possession by demons, which could be "cast out." It is certain that those who afterward set down the reports of his cures had that belief. There was, no doubt, much faith healing, much change of mental attitude with marvelous physical effect, and much exaltation of spirit among the simple people in the course of his ministrations, which gave rise to more stories of miracles than were preserved. He may himself have believed in a divine power working through him, for it was a common belief with prophets and preachers; but we may be sure that it was no more supernatural in his case than in others, and stories which told of the suspension of natural laws and the doing of the physically impossible were inventions or perversions, as they have been in many other instances, ancient and modern. There is evidence in the simple accounts of what are called the "Synoptic Gospels" that he deprecated the bruiting abroad of these wonders, which appealed to superstition and not to reason, and denounced those who sought for miraculous "signs" as evidence of his right to speak with authority.

Did he ever believe himself to be, in any sense, the promised Messiah, or Christ, or make any of the pretensions imputed to him at the later time when doctrines were propagated which made myth of his birth and his death and built a structure of faith upon belief in the resurrection and ascent into the heavens of his body, reanimated by the spirit that left it on the cross? When the belief that he had risen was spread abroad and had taken hold upon the ardent souls of certain of his disciples who regarded the new gospel as for the Jews alone, there was an eager searching of the scriptures to account for the dreadful fate that had befallen one upon whom they had looked as a greater than John the Baptist or any of the prophets of Israel in the days of its triumphs and its calamities. It was then, and not till then, that evidence was found which was sufficient to convince an uncritical generation that his life and his suffering and death had been prefigured in all the scriptures, that he was in truth that promised "Son of man" who was to rescue his people, establish an everlasting kingdom and reign in peace over the saints.

When this conception of the Messiah seized upon the active brain of Paul, after the dazzling vision and the celestial voice on the road to Damascus, if these were, as related, the cause of his sudden conversion, it became the germ of a new theology in which the "son of man" was to become the "son of God" in a peculiar sense.

The self-appointed apostle to the Gentiles lived and wrought apart from the disciples at Jerusalem. He was unfamiliar with the life, character and teachings of Jesus, but was learned in the scriptures and an acute thinker in the manner of his race and time. The all-sufficient fact to him was the resurrection and the assurance it gave of victory over death for all who would believe. He expected the end of all earthly things before his generation had passed away, the appearing of "the Lord" in the clouds of heaven, the awakening of them that slept by the sounding of a trumpet, the transformation of those who were still in the flesh, and the gathering of the saints in a realm of bliss.

Paul built his theology upon a mythical Adam in whose sin all were made subject to death, a mythical Abraham to whom the promise of blessing to all nations through his "seed" was made, a mythical interpretation of the old law under which all were bound until the time of release should come, and a mythical release from the law by the crucifixion of the Nazarene as a sacrifice and a ransom for all. His doctrine was developed and disseminated in his preaching, in letters to his congregations of Gentile converts, and in other letters written in his name. This, with the teaching of other apostles, had much influence upon the writing of the first three gospels. During the period when "the Lord's coming" was expected no attempt was made at a systematic account of the life and death of Jesus. Only scattered and imperfect records of his sayings were kept. Many of these must have been lost and others misinterpreted and perverted, while events floated in memory and became traditions.

The evangelists wrote in the belief that had grown up in their time, not only in the resurrection of Jesus, but in his Messiahship, which was supposed to make him of necessity a descendant of David. A single doubtful passage in the introductory part of what is considered on the whole to be a genuine epistle of Paul, speaks of him as "born of the seed of David according to the flesh," and "declared to be the son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection of the dead." In two of the gospels were included obviously mythical accounts of the birth, quite inconsistent and irreconcilable with each other. Two equally inconsistent genealogies were devised. The descent from David and the conception by a virgin mother were products of imagination working upon scriptural suggestion, when the necessity was felt of supporting a new doctrine of the Messiah, so shaped as to fit one who was in fact as far removed as possible from the old conception of the promised

Prince of Peace and ruler of the nations. Passages of scripture were torn from their context, perverted from their natural meaning and application, and subjected to strained interpretation, to sustain that doctrine, and the gospel narratives were made to conform to it in a crude and uncritical fashion, either by the original writers or in subsequent revisions. By no rational process can there be extracted from a critical study of the documents any ground for believing that Jesus ever announced himself or regarded himself as a promised or predestined Messiah of his people or of the world, and the presumption is not in keeping with the character portrayed in his genuine utterances and real acts.

The incident related in two of the gospels as occurring at Cæsarea Philippi and in the third as following the miraculous feeding near Bethsaida—with no designation of place or time but with wholly different accompaniments from those at Cæsarea—was undoubtedly evolved from the desire to make him a witness to that Messiahship in which the writers devoutly believed. The apocalyptic utterances attributed to him in quite different forms in the three gospels could hardly have been preserved through the interval between his journey to Jerusalem and the appearance of these writings. They do not agree in the three versions, they are not in keeping with the tone of his previous sayings, and they have every appearance of excerpts or imitations from apocalyptic writings that came after the destruction of Jerusalem, to the incidents of which there are distinct allusions. The reasonable conclusion is that the teacher of Nazareth never thought of himself as the Messiah. By the time the fourth gospel was written, toward the middle of the second century, the conception of the "Christ" had undergone a decided change, and the narratives of the life and death, of the miraculous "signs" and the resurrection, were transformed to sustain a new doctrine.

The tendency to mythicize the life and death of Jesus in adapting them to support doctrines evolved by the first apostles and developed by the "fathers of the church," was displayed in flagrant form in the "apocryphal" gospels of the second and third centuries, which, with all their crudity and incredibility, were long accepted by many as confirmatory of the writings finally canonized as sacred truth. While the process of conversion to Christianity was going on, mainly outside of the old Jewish domain and in "heathen lands," with centers at Antioch, Ephesus and Smyrna in Asia, at Corinth, Philippi and Rome in Europe, and at Alexandria and Carthage in Africa, while belief was going through many phases and fighting

its way through varied heresies to orthodoxy, down to the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine and the coagulation of doctrines into dogma at the Council of Nicæa, the apologetic and polemic genius of that long period worked in the soil and atmosphere of old mythologies. It had been no uncommon thing to attribute the remarkable qualities of men who excited wonder by their teachings or their exploits to a divine paternity or to deify them after their death. Fictitious and miraculous achievements were readily credited to them after they were gone and were as readily accepted. Mystical blending of the divine and human or the union of more than one personality in the same being was not a matter to perplex belief.

In that age, in the lands in which Christianity was planted and fostered, there was little understanding of nature and no knowledge of the laws of its working, and the mind of man had long been accustomed to attribute to supernatural forces, which were more or less clearly personified, whatever it saw or felt which it did not understand. Traditions and philosophies saturated with mythical conceptions, pervaded the intellectual atmosphere, and those who thought could not free themselves from their influence. It is no wonder that mythical elements entered into the dogmas of Christianity, as these were settled in the early centuries, in such measure as to constitute their chief substance and almost to cause the simple teachings of Jesus and his real character and relation to mankind to be lost sight of.

Perhaps in the mental and spiritual soil and climate of the place and time the new combination of theology, Christology and soteriology was necessary to the early growth of a religion that was to spread and exert a dominating power in human history, but that does not prevent it from being largely the offspring of myth. It was wrought out of the consciousness and the introspection of gifted and earnest men, in fierce conflict with those who would destroy a faith that they deemed necessary to their own salvation and the regeneration of the world, and they did "most potently and powerfully believe" what they taught. In all their subtle lucubration, their keen ratiocination from premises that had only a mythical basis, they never did really lose sight of the essential object of those simple teachings, those kindly ministrations, that pure character, of the lowly Nazarene. That was, after all, the leaven that saved the church through its struggles with paganism and atheism, for in the midst of cruelty, oppression and corruption in those early centuries love of truth and purity, self-sacrifice and devotion

to the good of others, the real Christian virtues, were cherished and inculcated. They had their source in the life and teachings of Jesus and their support in the consecrated dogmas of a church that could not be held together without such artificial devices of cohesion.

The mythical element did not cease to ferment in the growth of Christianity after it became established as the religion of the civilized western world. Much of it had been solidified in dogmas which were deemed of such divine authority, were so sanctified and consecrated, that they could not be, must not be, changed or tampered with. But it continued to work new accretions upon the body of faith, and the middle ages of European history are redolent of myth and miracle within the purlieus of the church, some of which would vie in crude and gross quality with the ancient mythologies, while lacking their poetic glamor.

The old cosmogony had not been discarded. Out of the Sheol of the Hebrews, the Hades of the Greeks, the figurative Gehenna of the gospels and the lake of fire of the apocalypse, the hell of eternal torment beneath the earth was devised by a lurid imagination. The Satan, the adversary of man and God, compounded of Ahriman and Beelzebub, became the mediæval devil, and the demons that peopled the air in ancient times were converted into his imps. Above the sky, the ancient abode of Yahveh and his angels, the counterpart of Olympus and Elysium, was established a realm of celestial light and joy for the final abode of the blessed saints, with a mystical passage through the unknown for a toilsome journey of those who might yet be saved after death by the saying of prayers and masses. Worship was enriched with the cult of virgin mother and of glorified saints, and the arts of painting, sculpture, architecture and music were lavished upon a worship more varied and ornate than that of ancient Greece, and far from the simplicity of Galilee.

Dante embodied much of this sanctified mythology in immortal verse and the artists of the Renaissance helped to give it perpetuity. The protestant revolt but half won emancipation from its power, and Milton and other imaginative writers of his own and a later day made their contributions to the durability of the residue. The mythical element, undergoing variation from time to time, has held its place in Christianity down to the age of science and rational philosophy, until it has become a gross anachronism. It is preserved in antiquated dogmas, in creeds and forms of worship, in observances that have no vital relation to the life or the destiny of

man. What was once the strength of the church is becoming its weakness and loosening its hold upon the conduct of human society, because it is out of harmony with what is now known by the learned, thought by the wise, and vaguely apprehended by the simple.

Religion is necessary to the progress and elevation of mankind, to salvation from degenerating tendencies. Its best embodiment is still in Christianity, at least for those to whom that is a legitimate heritage. Is it not time to divorce it from old mythologies and bring it into harmony with the science and knowledge and the conclusions of reason in these modern times? There is nothing in their lessons that can supersede the ethical or the religious teaching of that "divinely gifted man" of Galilee, who planted the minute seed of the "rule of God" and infused into the gross lump of humanity the leaven of his own lofty intuition. No doubt there is need of appeal to emotion and sentiment, as well as acceptance of knowledge and submission to reason, and there is helpfulness to higher character and better conduct in the uplifting influence of an esthetic worship. But why cling to old dogmas which the intelligence of the time can no longer accept with unquestioning faith, and which reason boldly rejects?

Doctors of divinity who are really learned and thoughtful are fain to accept the conclusions of science and to admit that the creation of worlds and races and the development and progress of mankind have been a process of evolution, but they strive to effect a compromise with old beliefs and reconcile these with the conclusions of science and with the principles of philosophy which those conclusions dictate. It is a vain and futile striving. Why not discard the heritage of old mythologies and reconcile religion with science by accepting the best knowledge attainable and following the guidance of the most enlightened reason, as the "men of light and leading" in the past have done in their own day? Why not accept the demonstration that Adam and the garden of Eden, Abraham as the father of nations, and the anointed one who was to make Israel triumph over the world, were myths and not a sound basis for theological beliefs in this day and generation? Why not allow to the ancient Hebrew genius the rights of imagination and invention, concede its subjection to limitations of human capacity, acknowledge the defects and imperfections of its productions, and judge its work by an honest criticism, instead of persisting in a divine infallibility for it or even a special supervision of divine care not vouchsafed to the rest of human history and achievement? Why

not recognize the liability to error of those who made the first records, so obviously defective, of the doings and sayings of the "good master" who came out of Nazareth, so obscure to the eyes of the world in his life, so humiliated and outraged in his death, so glorified in the resurrection, not of his body, but of the memory of his life and the vitality of his words? Why not consider the makers of doctrines and framers of dogmas in the early centuries of the Christian era as fallible men, doing their best according to their lights, but subject to the effects of their mental inheritance and the influence of their environment, and not building for all time?

The Christian church is a product of evolution and the elements have been in unwonted ferment in the last fifty years. It cannot stop advancing if it would continue to live and maintain its hold upon the living and the coming generations. It must discard ancient conceptions which the revelations of the present time discredit, and accept those which its knowledge and wisdom will sustain. It must purge itself of decadent mythism by inoculation with a sound philosophy, admittedly not perfect, but progressive and tending evermore toward perfection, though that goal may not be reached in this world. Its God must be the divine power of the universe as it is now known, and not the deity of Israel's narrow history or of the struggle of Jew or primitive Christian with the desperate force of decaying heathen empires. Its conceptions of life and death and eternity must be derived from revelations of the present and not divinations of ancient times. Science and philosophy based upon science are lighting up a common sense among the peoples that is fatal to superstition, and to that the teachers of religion must appeal if they would renew their power over the conduct of men.

The exercise of that power is needed as much as ever. There was never greater need of work for the salvation of men; but it is not salvation from an impending destruction of the world, or from a terrible retribution in another world. It is salvation in this world from the consequences of degenerating tendencies in human nature. There is yet no higher truth than that preached by those sages of Israel who made wickedness synonymous with folly and righteousness identical with wisdom. Nothing is more foolish from the point of view of mere self-interest than vice and crime or evil habits, and nothing is wiser or more satisfying to man in this world than upright character and righteous conduct; and men may well be taught if they are right in this life they will be safe for any life to come. For that teaching there is no need of mythical dog-

mas or appeals to superstitious hopes and fears; but there is need of the acceptance of the best knowledge and soundest reasoning, and an appeal to the common sense of the human mind.

Christianity needs to recover a language which the common people will understand and hear gladly. If the church is really intent upon saving men, in the sense in which they most need salvation, it must get down among them and come close to them, giving attention to those that need a physician rather than those who can take care of themselves. Its work must be less for the esthetic gratification of "members" who pay for pews, subscribe to charities, wear fine raiment and behave in decorous fashion, and more for the correction of evil practices and the rescue of those who are going down or are kept from rising by the forces of degeneracy. In short, it must get back with greater earnestness and zeal to those immortal and immortalizing teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and away from the deadening dogmas of the Christ of ecumenical councils.